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ABSTRACT

Piaget's concepts of knowledge seen as a result of active interaction between the child and his environment, and motivation, seen as intrinsic to intellectual functioning, have implications for the development of preschool programs. A preschool program must be action-oriented if the child is to learn to "know" and must offer an environmental setting that facilitates the modification of intelligence. The particular characteristics of preoperational children make them especially attuned to the use of the following conditions and materials in preschool programs: (1) the use of materials that help the child build feelings of competency and that center on him; (2) opportunities and time for the child to repeat actions meaningful to him and to order his actions within an environment complex enough to make intellectual demands upon him; (3) provision for play wherein he may adapt his play to satisfy his purposes; (4) materials used to represent the child's concrete experiences-wood, clay, music, reading aloud; and (5) provision for functional situations wherein he can engage in a range of mental actions. (KM)

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Piagetian Theory and the Development of a Model Curriculum
for Young Children

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A mother, finding her young daughter gazing at the fish swimming in the fish bowl, asked her, "Why do you suppose the fish stay in the bowl rather than out here on the floor?" "Because they are afraid of the cat," responded the child. As adults we may be amused by such remarks of young children, but the work of Piaget has enabled us to be more insightful of children's language. We may still chuckle, but we are also alerted to the limitations of the child's thought, alerted to his inability to think causally in the way of an adult. We are reminded, too, that he is in the developmental stage Piaget defines as preoperational which approximates the years of two through seven. The discussion today is limited to this stage, more particularly to the 3-5 year olds, because I am describing the program of the USC Preschool. It is a program derived from general as well as particular concepts of Piagetian theory which seem to have implications for developing educational programs for preoperational children. With time limitations in mind, this paper is divided into two main sections: 1) the discussion of two general concepts of Piagetian theory with implications for programs; and 2) the particular characteristics of preoperational children and these relationships to developing programs.

The first broad concept, a fundamental one to Piagetian theory, is his notion of knowledge. Knowledge is not a reflection of reality but a result of ACTIVE interaction between the child and his environment. Through his own actions the child learns to "know" the world around him. In some instances he learns to modify (or reorganize) it for his purposes. In other instances he learns how he must modify and adapt his behavior to the environment. He is busily engaged in developing an intellectual organization which is continually modified and reorganized as he grows and develops. This reorganization of thinking: 1) builds toward increasing complexity through continued interaction upon the child's environment; 2) is learned through his senses; and 3) is developed through use and through activities which demand that the child accommodate to the "new". Thus the process of "knowing" develops through the child's experience and within his social milieu.

The second major concept I will mention and one closely related to the knowledge concept of Piagetian theory is the notion of motivation. Piaget views it as intrinsic to intellectual functioning. Inherently the child is desirous of intellectual adaptation and organization. His neurological system is such that he strives toward mastery. Uncomfortable when his system is out of equilibrium, he attempts to bring internal congruence to the dissonance he finds within his environment. This concept of motivation is what Robert White described as "motivation for competency". He explained it this way, "Given a situation of mild arousal the child will engage in a wide variety of activities because it is satisfying to him to deal effectively with his environment. The child will repeat the action until he masters it for his personal satisfaction".

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What do these two general concepts imply for the development of programs for young children? First, the program must be action oriented if the child is to learn "to know". Secondly, the environmental setting must be one which facilitates the modification of intelligence. Included in the setting are such components as the following:

-Problem solving and answer seeking activities
-Exposure to a variety of sensory experiences and of novelty
-Diversity within the environment which encourages the child to organize his experiences in various ways
-A range of activities from simple to complex with multiple opportunities for greater "knowing"
-Time for self practice and decision making
-Interaction with adults who can provide corrective feedback, raise questions which evoke a range of mental activity on the part of the child, and support his exploratory activities

The balance of this paper is devoted to the particular characteristics of preoperational children as Piaget has defined for us. What are these characteristics?

1. He is the focus of his world. All space and time are centered on him, he thinks. He is unable to understand differing points of view from his own.
2. He believes what he sees, thus, he is a non-conserver.
3. His thoughts are tied to action. He has propensities for movement, for manipulation of objects as he engages in "oral thinking"(language), for exploration through his senses.
4. He is building the foundation for symbolically living with his world; he is learning to "represent" his experiences in a variety of media. How does this emerge? Piaget suggests five interrelated behaviors which give rise to symbolic representation. These five behaviors, appearing almost simultaneously but in an increasingly complex order are:
   a) Deferred imitation
   b) Symbolic play
   c) Drawings or graphic images
   d) Mental imagery, which Piaget describes as internalized imitation
   e) Language

Time does not permit for discussion of these behaviors; however I can refer you to a paper I presented in 1971 which discussed in detail these particular behaviors. (see references)

Now let us turn to the conditions and materials which are attuned to the patterns of thought natural to the preoperational child:

1. The use of materials which help the child to build feelings of competency and which center on him. Some examples are: photographs of himself at various activities, tapes of his voice, TV playback wherein he is his own model for imitation.
2. Opportunities and time for the child to repeat actions meaningful to him and to order his actions within an environment complex enough to make intellectual demands upon him.
3. Provision for play wherein he may adapt his play to satisfy his purposes. The use of blocks, sand, water, play houses, dress up

clothes are time honored successes.

4. The inclusion of materials used to represent the child's concrete experiences. Wood construction, paints, clay, music, creative movement, reading to children, and taking dictation of their language are all necessary ingredients.

5. Provision for functional situations wherein he can engage in a range of mental actions such as: recall, discriminate, classify, order, sequence, predict, etc.

Walking into such a classroom one possibly would not see much difference in the materials and equipment of our USC Preschool and a traditional nursery school. The difference lies in our purposes for the program: what we are learning about the development of children's intelligence, and how to make a better "match" between each child's past experience and his readiness for the next step in modifying his intellectual organization. It seems that the differences are analogous to what Piaget himself has done for us who have studied child behavior for many years. We know that children do and say the same things from one generation to the next and have done so for a good many years. Then Piaget came along and began to ask different questions about child behavior. When he did, he arrived at different answers. Thus he has made it possible for us to interpret child behavior in new and possibly more knowledgable ways. Now we must ask ourselves, "What does the child do in his environment, and what does the environment do to the child?" Some day we hope to have some definitive answers.

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